

1-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Allison, Neal P. (2002) "Christian Pragmatism: The Freedom and Power to Love," *Leaven*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol10/iss2/7>

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Christian Pragmatism: The Freedom and Power to Love

NEAL P. ALLISON

Throughout the history of Christianity, one of the essential elements of its nature has been freedom. It is a disciplined freedom. It allows one the freedom to try different means to love God and neighbor, but disciplined in that it is under the judgment and guidance of God through the Holy Spirit. To the Christian, the ability to focus solely on Christ's spirit that dwells within allows one to have an unusual perception of reality.

Søren Kierkegaard related this to purity. "Purity of heart is to will one thing."¹ By focusing only on Jesus, Christians are able to perceive wondrous things. This is the heart of Christian pragmatism—loving God and neighbor with all of one's being and in turn experiencing the freedom and power that comes from such an effort. This allows a flexibility that knows no bounds. In short, have God's goodness as your standard and after that, anything goes. This disciplined freedom is evident in all healthy and effective Christianity.

Historically, the philosophy of pragmatism has often been criticized for a lack of standards. It is the frightening proposition of the end justifying the means. Instead of trying to tack a philosophy onto Christianity, it would be more helpful to draw out the pragmatic forces inherent in the teachings of Jesus. In traditional pragmatism, truth is a somewhat nebulous concept that changes with each situation.

To the Christian, however, truth is found in the person of Jesus Christ, having originated with God, the source of all being. When this truth is applied pragmatically, it is the most effective way of approaching life. Jesus tells us, "You will know them by their fruits"

(Matt 7:16a NKJV);² and James says that if our truth is not active, then we are not really Christians at all (Jas 2:18). Active truth is something that does work and works well. This is confirmed by experience as the most effective means of handling various situations. Jesus offers us a practical yet radical application of truth. He tells us in Matthew 10:16 to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves"(NRSV).

We are to approach situations realistically, while being open and pure enough to hear the voice of God. If Christians actually believe that God's spirit is active in the world, then they must also believe that he is in each situation and will reveal what is the best way to handle it. God is the river of life, and it is the duty of Christians to be open to its flow and to go where it carries us.

With this flexible but cultivated attitude in mind, a Christian becomes aware of certain characteristics that manifest themselves in effective Christianity. Historically, there have been many developed views of pragmatism in a religious form. William James, the noted psychologist and philosopher, expressed a well-

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known pragmatism at the beginning of the twentieth century. He saw truth as changing with different situations and as being confirmed by what works.³

A Christian pragmatism is also quite evident in the later thought of the noted twentieth-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr's powers of political analysis and critique from a Christian perspective are considered among the greatest in American history.⁴ His thought passes through many stages in its

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progression—from pacifism in World War I, to a Marxist perspective by the early 1930s, to realism with the approach of World War II, and finally to a developed pragmatism by the early 1950s. As Niebuhr uses each of these tools in his analysis of world events, they are always informed by a strong grounding in Christian faith. Reality cannot accurately be perceived without an understanding of a sovereign God that created and sustains it.

Niebuhr, like James before him, sought to create a "sober, goal-oriented" view that was "tough-minded" and realistic. His perspective was an attempt to balance out the naïve optimism and sullen pessimism⁵ that had plagued Christianity for so long. Critiquing politics and society from a Christian mindset allowed him the ability to view relevant situations through a biblical standard that "provides a benchmark for judging between greater goods and lesser evils."⁶ Mark Haas notes that this standard was "applied pragmatically" but "derived deontologically" (i.e., through the study of moral obligation), and this was done in order to fulfill "the law of love to the greatest degree possible, given the world as it is."⁷ Finally, Niebuhr's pragmatism manifested itself in the realization that true faith was confirmed by experience when he wrote, "The only way of validating a faith is to bear witness to it in life."⁸ Faith is true because God has given us the most effective means possible of following his will.

Niebuhr's analysis of society from a perspective of biblical absolutes is quite penetrating, but it lacks a developed sense of just how powerful God's presence is in the world. A more developed view of Christian pragmatism must be aware of the connection between a child of God and the Spirit of God. The Spirit is the source of true strength and perception. From this source, certain characteristics are evident and available to those willing to access them. Generally, these characteristics in Christian pragmatism include determination, flexibility, boldness, goodness, and awareness.

There is a *determination* that comes from God (Matt 10:22) and allows one to handle the greatest adversity and still prevail. This is the "toughness" that Niebuhr refers to and helps us not waver in our resolve. *Flexibility* is an essential part of dealing with any situation realistically and practically. There is a pragmatic quality to Paul the apostle's approach that screams loudly at all those willing to listen. "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some," he tells us in 1 Corinthians. With an incredible adaptability, Paul becomes whatever is necessary for what he refers to as "the sake of the gospel" (1 Cor 9:19–23). Bamboo is an often-used metaphor in the East that represents these two characteristics. It has a subtle strength or firmness when planted, but is able to withstand the fiercest storm because of its flexibility and ability to bend. It also can grow in a variety of places.

In order to be the *most* effective, a Christian must have *boldness*. "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" describes the power of boldness in Acts 4:31. Martin Luther explains, "The nature of faith . . . requires of us a free surrender and a joyful daring."⁹

It is what the Bible calls the *goodness* of God, however, that ultimately provides the clarity to handle any situation. When God tells humanity in Micah 6:8 what is good, it is a simple description. He speaks of justice, love, kindness, and humility. God relates to us how to be divine; that is, how to act like God. As stated earlier, humans access this goodness by being aware and connected to the source of all life. Without

awareness, the follower of God is missing the beauty of the divine in every moment. Paul was attentive to such things and tells of the wisdom that is available through being able to “spiritually discern” reality and make “judgments about all things.” With such power, we start to learn how to think like God with the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:13–16).

Paul gives us more information on how to achieve the “mind of Christ” in Romans 12:2. It is here that he tells us of the “transformation” and “renewing” that occurs when we are open to God. With this change in perception, followers of God can begin to understand what God’s will is in different situations. Christians are able to be transformed by heeding Jesus’ teaching “‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’” (Matt 16:24). *It is this loss of self in order to find one’s true self that is the secret to a more complete view of reality.* Thomas Merton, the prolific Christian writer, recommends that one attain this state through *contemplation*. Contemplation allows humans to find the transformation and awareness that we so desperately need to change our world for the better and to allow God’s will to work through us. Merton’s idea of contemplation comes from the long-standing Christian tradition of *vita contemplativa*. Here, “the presence of God is experienced as a type of awakening, a sudden gift of awareness of being able to witness the Real within what is empirically real.”¹⁰

Mark Muldoon further describes contemplation when he observes that it is: “. . . a free gift rooted in the experience of solitude, thoughtful concentration, and openness to the world as it is lived.”¹¹ Merton himself makes the obvious but often overlooked observation of how to go about using the results of such an experience:

How am I to know the will of God? Even where there is no other more explicit claim on my obedience, such as a legitimate command, the very nature of each situation usually bears written into itself some indication of God’s will. For whatever is demanded by truth, by justice, by mercy, or by love must surely be taken to be willed by God. To consent to His will is, then, to consent to be true, or to speak truth, or at least to seek it. To obey Him is to respond to His will expressed in the need of another person, or at least to respect the rights of others. . . . No man who ignores the rights and needs of others can hope to walk in the light of contemplation, because his way has turned aside from truth, from compassion, and therefore from God.¹²

Merton, like many other Christians through the centuries, understands the power of perception that comes from such a disciplined focus. The cultivation of the self in the focused act of being in the presence of God allows one to break through to the clarity and freedom of the divine.

American politics is full of situations that can assist the Christian in developing *a practical yet radical attitude of biblical justice in fighting for the oppressed and improving our world for all of God’s children*. The freedom and power in a developed relationship with God are evident to the attentive observer, but are often hard to define in specific situations.

The subtlety and mystery of God’s will make the believer wait with humility and longing to follow his goodness. There are, however, concrete examples of effective and just pragmatism *if we use Merton’s observation in the quotation above*.

As stated earlier, the philosophy of pragmatism is a somewhat uniquely American phenomenon.

But long before the development of the philosophy, the practical nature of the American colonist and later the framers of the Constitution exuded a pragmatic mindset. It was a common European observation of the era that the ruggedness of the American wilderness along with other factors created a determined yet adapt-

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able individual that had to be tough just to survive. James Madison, often referred to as the “father of the Constitution,” is another excellent example of the power of pragmatism in politics when it is combined with an intense moral backing. Madison had a shrewd understanding of the corruptibility of human nature and made realistic provisions for it in the U.S. Constitution. He created a system of checks and balances among the three branches of government in order to achieve a balance that would maintain honesty and prevent power-mongering. The framers’ creation of an amendment system for the modification of the document to maintain a sense of justice in the growing country’s needs demonstrates a remarkable amount of flexibility and far-sightedness. *As the United States has become a more just and equitable society through the freeing of the slaves to the granting of voting rights of women, the Amendments have allowed it to adapt for the overall common good.* A determined but flexible mindset helped make this happen.

A nineteenth-century example of a moral pragmatism in action is that of perhaps the greatest of American presidents, Abraham Lincoln. A devout but haunted person, Lincoln used the moral determination of his Christianity to infuse a cunning and politically savvy mind that produced some of the most remarkable results in world history. Stephen Carter, the distinguished Yale Law professor, addresses the relation between “political compromise” and “integrity” with an interesting conclusion. Citing James O’Toole, Carter notes that there can be integrity in pragmatism. Referring to Jefferson’s and Lincoln’s stances on slavery, O’Toole argues that “the long-term courses they adopted were based on what was morally right.”¹³ The approach that Lincoln specifically used was to aim at two goals but move toward one by “temporarily postponing another.” *The enormous task facing him was to preserve the Union while attempting to end the long entrenched institution of slavery.* Lincoln made initial compromises on the slavery issue while holding the Union together almost by sheer force of will. His decision showed integrity because he was continually moving toward his goal or end result, which was “good and right” and because *ultimately he was able to achieve both goals through his pragmatic approach.* All of this maneuvering was part of an overall strategy¹⁴ that highlights the fluid movements of the art of compromise.

Two twentieth-century presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, offer further evidence of the effectiveness of pragmatism with principle. FDR was incredibly pragmatic in his openness to the various New Deal plans put forth in order to bring the United States out of the worst economic catastrophe in its history. His critics attacked him over his apparent move toward socialism but in reality, he used

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just enough socialistic programs to drag the nation out of the breadline. *FDR did not allow himself to be confined by a specific ideology that would restrict him from helping the country.*

JFK presents another pragmatic example in his approach to the growing Vietnam situation in the early 1960s. *Kennedy stood in a long line of American political persuasion dating back to the Puritan combination of the connection to God and a passion for “the usefulness, workability, and practicality of ideas and proposals for criteria of judgement.”*¹⁵ He continued in the use of a deep felt

idealistic or principled rhetoric while forging ahead with a practical solution to the situation. JFK thought that American and French policy in Southeast Asia was not involved or pragmatic enough. While attempting to address the situation realistically, he always stressed the end goal of the policy—the idea of freedom. “To check the southern drive of Communism makes sense,” Kennedy wrote, “but not only through reliance on the force of arms. The task is, rather, to build strong native non-Communist sentiment within these areas.”¹⁶ JFK’s solution was to expand the use of Special Forces within the region. These highly trained and dedicated

soldiers were the elite of the U.S. Army. Their training extended from medicine to engineering to demolition and beyond. They would attempt to win the “hearts and minds” of the local residents in order to prevent them from following the Communist cause.

But Kennedy, as well as Lincoln, presents the Christian with the dilemma of the use of force to secure a just end. Lincoln compared slavery to a snake in bed with slumbering children. If we become so fixated on killing the snake (slavery), we may ultimately injure the children (the Union).¹⁷ His analogy is interesting not only for its colloquial effect but also for its assumption that violence is a natural and necessary reaction in this particular circumstance. Kennedy was also willing to commit a “reliance on the force of arms” to achieve freedom for those he perceived as under a tyrannical thumb. And even in the current struggle against global terrorism in the twenty-first century, George W. Bush sees the need for highly skilled special operation troops as an effective and necessary defense against further acts of destruction. “The best way to pursue peace,” Bush stated in a speech in October 2001, “is to pursue those who threaten it.” The implication of violence is obvious here.

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This sentiment is reflected in the Special Forces memorial statue known as “Bronze Bruce.” The statue has an M16 rifle in his right hand to show that violence may be needed, but his open left hand shows “his willingness to help and provide comfort.”¹⁸ It was JFK that first called Special Forces “Green Berets”¹⁹ and referred to their distinctive headgear as a “Symbol of Excellence . . . Badge of Courage”²⁰ in showing his respect for the resilience and boldness of these adaptable soldiers who are willing to go to the most dangerous places in the world at a moment’s notice.

The nature of twenty-first century warfare, which seems to occur more and more in the world’s developing nations—makes these types of individuals extremely valuable. “Their motto is ‘To Free the Oppressed,’” writes Robert Young Pelton in November 2001 of these soldiers fighting in Afghanistan, “something they have done so far in this war with no civilian casualties, no blowback, and no regrets.”²¹ There is an apparent strength of will in special operations soldiers that seems unique in humanity. They are people with a purpose backed by principle and determination. Their fight in Afghanistan was to stamp out potential future threats, to liberate the oppressed, and perhaps help create a more just society there. Why would they endure such hardship and horror if they did not believe so strongly in what they were doing?

There is a confidence and determination here that perhaps can enlighten our world. Does the “no regrets” mindset in the pursuit of justice provide the needed clarity to accomplish such an arduous task? Can a Christian support the use of violence in light of Jesus’ teachings? These are difficult but necessary questions with which the Christian pragmatist must continually struggle in an attempt to live a free yet powerful existence. One’s view of the use of force can determine whether a Christian can serve in a government that carries out violent actions. From a pragmatic perspective, a Christian understands that, as Niebuhr reminds us, we are under the law of love. *Love is the motivation behind the desire for justice, which is our duty in this world. Inherent within this love is the need to protect individuals from aggression and oppression.*

These cited examples of a moral or principled pragmatism used in the political realm accomplished a great deal in helping the oppressed and making American society and the world a safer and perhaps a little more just place to live. Thomas Merton thought that each situation would reveal God’s will to those with the courage to seek it. He believed that situations “demanded” truth and justice, mercy and love. For is it not part of God’s nuanced wisdom that he can work his will through these ideals whether the person following them knows it or not? The above examples show principled pragmatism working in politics in the defining document of the U.S. government, the country’s greatest physical and moral crisis, its greatest economic

crisis, and a new foreign threat unlike any the United States has ever faced. This viewpoint can help inform Christians in their search for peace and justice in the ugly and often confusing world of politics. By realistically understanding the history and context of various situations and using *determination, flexibility, boldness, goodness, and awareness*, the Christian can help make a more just world that would make the Savior smile.

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ENDNOTES

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- 5 Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 151.
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- 21 Pelton, 72.

